

All About Palm Oil

What is Palm Oil?

About half of all packaged products sold in a supermarket contain palm oil, a vegetable oil which is derived from the fruit of the palm tree. It is included in a wide variety of different foods and household products. However, the manufacture of palm oil is **controversial** because it often involves farming large areas of palm trees on land that was previously tropical rainforests. The **deforestation** of ancient and biodiverse tropical rainforests has been linked with a decline in habitats for endangered species and also with an increase in air pollution.

Why Is It Useful?

Palm oil has many special properties which make it an incredibly useful ingredient in various products which we buy. For example, it remains a solid at room temperature, is inexpensive and, due to its skin-conditioning ability, it even helps to moisturise our skin and hair! Consequently, palm oil is included in many daily-use products, from chocolate to instant noodles, shampoo to soap and even in biofuel which can power transportation or provide heat!

What's the Problem with Palm Oil?

Palm trees grow naturally in West Africa, a tropical climate. However, palm tree **plantations** are currently being developed in widespread regions of Indonesia and Malaysia. These countries are home to areas of tropical rainforests, which are being cleared to make way for the **plantations**. Clearing rainforests by felling or burning trees is known as **deforestation**. This is **controversial** because not only are these ancient rainforests a habitat for a diverse population of animals and plants, but they



Did You Know...?

- Greenpeace – an organisation concerned with protecting rainforests and our natural world – say that, in Indonesia, an area the size of a football pitch is cut down every 25 seconds.
- Sometimes palm oil might not be clearly labelled on the ingredients lists of products. Other names might include: vegetable oil, vegetable fat or even glyceryl!

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also help to provide essential oxygen and absorb harmful carbon dioxide, keeping our air clean. Many species – including orangutans, tigers and elephants – which live in the rainforests are already at a risk of extinction and need their habitats to be protected in order to prevent further losses.

What Can We Do to Help?

There are several ways in which we can help to protect the tropical rainforests. Firstly, we can choose to buy products that do not contain any palm oil at all. Iceland, a supermarket in the UK, has decided to stop using palm oil because they think its manufacture results in too much harm to our rainforests. Alternatively, we could buy products which contain **sustainable** palm oil – that which was grown and made in a responsible way, not harming the biodiversity of the rainforests. Finally, we could contact the manufacturers of our favourite products in order to urge them to use **sustainable** palm oil across all of their products.



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Glossary

controversial – Likely to cause public disagreement.

deforestation – The action of clearing a wide area of trees.

plantation – An area in which trees or crops have been planted.

sustainable – Keeping a balance by avoiding reducing natural resources.

Questions

1. What fraction of all packaged products contain palm oil? Tick **one**.

- ☐ about a quarter
- ☐ about a third
- ☐ about a fifth
- ☐ about a half

2. Why is the manufacture of palm oil controversial? Tick **two**.

- ☐ because it gives us various different products
- ☐ because it is linked to a decline in habitats for endangered species
- ☐ because it involves farming large areas of palm trees where tropical rainforests are
- ☐ because it is inexpensive

3. Give one example of a product which includes palm oil.

4. Look at the **Did You Know...?** fact box. What does the author mean when they say Greenpeace is '**concerned with protecting our natural world**'?

5. Fill in the missing words.

Clearing _____ by _____ or _____ trees is known as deforestation.

6. What do you think will happen if farmers continue with deforestation?

7. Why do you think the author has told us that palm oil might be labelled in different ways?

8. Why should we persuade the manufacturers of products which use palm oil to change what they do? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

